DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 527 EA 030 335

TITLE	Overview of Education in Texas. Measuring Up: The State of Texas Education. A Special Report of the Texas Kids Count Project.
INSTITUTION	Center for the Public Policy Priorities, Austin, TX.; Texas Univ., Austin. Center for Social Work Research.
SPONS AGENCY	Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD.
PUB DATE	1998-09-07
NOTE	22p.; For another report in the Measuring Up series, see EA 030 336.
AVAILABLE FROM	The Center for Public Policy Priorities, 900 Lydia Street, Austin, TX 78702. Tel: 512-320-0222; e-mail hormuth@cppp.org. For full text: http://www.cppp.org/kidscount.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Educational Assessment; Educational Change; Educational Environment; Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; *Needs Assessment; Public Schools; State Surveys
IDENTIFIERS	*Texas

ABSTRACT

This is the first in a series of reports about public education in Texas. This introductory report summarizes many of the challenges faced by students in Texas, as well as challenges faced by the schools they attend. It focuses on low income and disadvantaged children and describes some of the major education-reform efforts currently being discussed. The report opens with a profile of Texas school children and a discussion of some of the challenges faced by these children. It explores environmental and social factors, family literacy, early childhood education, learning standards and student assessment, student achievement, social promotion, dropouts, children with special challenges, bilingual education, special education, school finance, school crowding, professional development, technology in schools, school facilities, parental and family involvement with schools, violence in schools, school-community partnerships, charter schools, contracting, school-choice magnet schools, school-based services for children and their families, and vouchers. The report concludes that almost half of all students in Texas are considered economically disadvantaged, with many of them lacking English proficiency or suffering from disabilities and barriers to learning. Each issue raised in the report serves as a brief introduction to each of the topics to be discussed in more detail in upcoming reports. (RJM)

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MEASURING UP
The State of Texas Education

A SPECIAL REPORT OF THE TEXAS KIDS COUNT PROJECT

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

OVERVIEW OF EDUCATION IN TEXAS

This is the first in a series of reports about public education in Texas. This series of reports, produced by the Center for Public Policy Priorities as part of the Texas Kids Count Project is entitled ***Measuring Up: The State of Texas Education***. It explores issues in education of Texas children, with an emphasis on low-income and disadvantaged children in public schools. This introductory report summarizes many of the challenges faced by students in Texas, as well as challenges faced by the schools they attend. It also describes some of the major education reform efforts currently being discussed. The topics for this overview and the subsequent reports in this series were suggested during meetings and discussions with policymakers and education experts.

Each of the topics touched on in this first overview report will be addressed in more detail in upcoming releases. Topics of future reports will include:

- School finance
- Bilingual programs
- Dropouts
- School violence
- School-based family services
- Support for principals and teachers
- Community involvement
- Children with special challenges
- Student assessment and performance
- Technology in schools
- Early childhood education
- Family literacy
- Parent involvement

Each report will provide an issue-specific analysis including relevant statistics for each county and descriptions of educational reforms and model programs for improving children's education. The information for these reports comes from an extensive literature review, data from state and federal agencies such as the Texas Education Agency and the U.S. Census, and interviews with experts in the field. Most of the information reported here is from the 1996-7 school year and is the most recent data available. Over the next several months, *Measuring Up* reports will be made available on our web site[1] as well as in paper form (please contact us to order copies). Additionally, please visit our web site for a comprehensive listing of education-related web site resources.

This report begins with a profile of Texas school children and a discussion of some of the challenges faced by many of these children — particularly those with low economic status. A discussion of the challenges faced by schools follows. Finally, a description is presented of some of the current educational reform measures that are being discussed followed by conclusions and recommendations. This overview serves as a brief introduction to each of the topics to be discussed in more detail in upcoming reports.

This overview provides an introduction to the topics of future *Measuring Up* reports and is the first in a series of reports on the state of Texas education. This and future reports will be published both on our web site (http://www.cppp.org/kidscount) and in hard copy form. Please call or email us to request copies: (512) 320-0222 hormuth@cppp.org

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EA 030335

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Measuring Up: The State of Texas Education is a publication of the Texas Kids Count Project.

Texas Kids Count is a project of the Center for Public Policy Priorities with the University of Texas Center for Social Work Research as a research partner. The project is part of a nationwide effort to highlight the well-being of children in every state. As part of this ongoing effort to build a better understanding of the conditions facing all children in Texas, Texas Kids Count is building a comprehensive database of indicators of child well-being. The data will be used to produce annual fact books and other analyses on the status of children in Texas.

Core funding for Texas Kids Count is provided by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.
For more information about Texas Kids Count call:

Pam Hormuth,
Texas Kids Count Project Coordinator
512/320-0222
email: hormuth@cppp.org
or visit our web site at: www.cppp.org/kidscount

The Center for Public Policy Priorities

The Center for Public Policy Priorities is a public policy research and analysis organization, seeking sound solutions to the challenges faced by low- and moderate-income families in Texas. The Center pursues this goal through independent research, analysis, policy development, public education, and technical assistance.

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Texas Kids Count Project, Center for Public Policy Priorities
Measuring Up: The State of Texas Education

Additional copies available from:
The Center for Public Policy Priorities, 900 Lydia Street, Austin, Texas 78702
512/320-0222

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Data Analysis and Writing:

Stacy Gaston
Claire Kriens
Jennifer West
Pamela Hormuth
Deborah Sharp
Paula Whittingham

Editing:

Dick Lavine
Laura Lein

Research Assistance:

Javier Leon
Zeynep Tufekcioglu

Art Work:

Sonya Cohen

Web Site:

Jonathan Singer

Texas Kids Count Collaborating Organizations Staff

Center for Public Policy Priorities
Dianne Stewart
Anne Dunkelberg
Carol Geiger
Pam Hormuth
Stephanie Hamm
Patrick Bresette
Dick Lavine
Chris Pieper

The University of Texas, Center for Social Work Research
Laura Lein
Javier Leon
Paula Whittingham
Claire Kriens
Deborah Sharp
Zeynep Tufekcioglu
Stacy Gaston
Jennifer West
Christy Chadwell
Ashley Shipp

Measuring Up Advisory Board

Wayne Holtzman
Kay Lambert
Carol McDaniel
Mary Ragland
Linda Schmid
Chris Webster

Special thanks to the following participants of interviews and focus groups:

Rosemary Alexander
Mary Campbell
Chris Dougherty
Joann Garner
Donna Groves
Terry Hitchcock
Joe Johnson
Scott Poland
Gary Price
Max Ramirez
Scott Robuck
Sue Schnarrs
Maria Sneider
Barbara Wand James
Don Warren
Laura Warren

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CHALLENGES FOR STUDENTS AND FAMILIES

Ensuring that each child in Texas has a solid education is among the most imperative tasks before us. Whether we are parents, teachers, employers, or members of the community, the education of our children has far-reaching implications. Educating our young people prepares a skilled workforce for tomorrow's competitive economy.

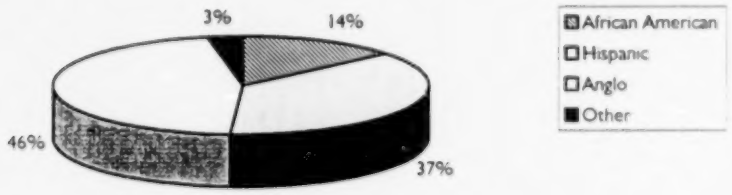
Experts believe that over the next 35 years, almost half of the new manufacturing jobs in Texas will be in industries related to high technology, including computers, semiconductors, and telecommunications.[2] Preparing workers to function in these industries will enhance Texas' ability to thrive in a competitive market.[3] The next sections of the report will describe students and discuss some of the challenges they face in obtaining the education they need as well as some of the improvements and successes we have seen in our educational system.

Student Profile

During the 1996-7 school year, there were 3,828,975 students attending 6,875 public schools in Texas. In Texas schools, forty-six percent of all students are Anglo, 37 percent are Hispanic, 14 percent African American, and 3 percent 'Other' ethnic group.[4] While 54 percent of all students are ethnic minorities, only 24 percent of all teachers are members of minority groups.[5]

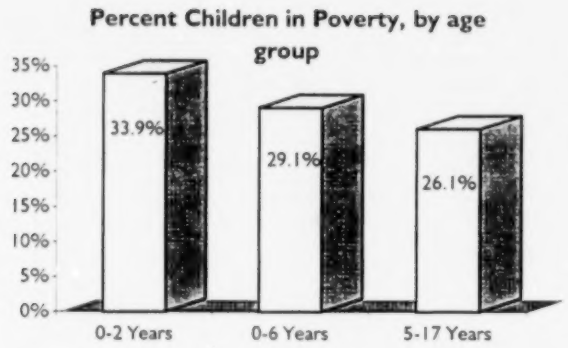
Almost half (48.1%) of all students in Texas are considered to be 'economically disadvantaged'. The term economically disadvantaged includes children in poverty, but also those living just above the poverty line (family income does not exceed 185% of the poverty line or $23,815 for a family of 3 in 1997). Children who are economically disadvantaged are eligible for free or reduced-price breakfast and lunch.[6]

Ethnic Profile of Student Population



Twelve percent of all students are in bilingual or English-as-a-Second Language (ESL) education programs. Twelve percent are in special education programs, 17 percent in career and technology education, and 8 percent are considered gifted and talented.[7]

Over 1.5 million Texas children (28.6%) are living in poverty according to new census statistics.[8] Young children are even more likely than other age groups to live in poverty with 30.3 percent of children less than 6 years being poor.[9] Federal poverty guidelines state that a family of three was living in poverty in 1997 if their income was $13,330 or less.



Even more children are living near the poverty line and face many of the same risks that those in poverty face. Risks faced by poor and near poor children include:

- Hunger
- Poor health
- Academic failure
- Dropping out
- Teen pregnancy
- Exposure to violence and crime

Education is the best way for those who grow up in and near poverty to make a better life. School completion and academic success increase the ability of children to escape poverty, form strong families, and raise successful children of their own.[10] Many schools face significant challenges in educating young people, particularly those schools with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students. Challenges to schools include:

- Fragmented approaches to improving teaching programs
- Low expectations of teachers about what children – particularly minority and low-income children—can achieve.
- Inadequate teacher preparation
- School violence, community violence, and substance abuse
- Inadequate funding
- Insufficient parental and community involvement
- A growing disparity in how technology is used in classrooms of different schools

Providing a good education is a complex task that must take into consideration not only which skills and abilities children need to succeed, but also the barriers and challenges to learning faced by children and their schools. Although some children living in poverty excel in school, poverty is closely associated with lower achievement and diminished success in school. Many of these factors influencing student's ability to learn as well as the challenges to schools will be discussed in more detail in subsequent *Measuring Up* reports.

Environmental and Social Factors

Environmental and social factors outside the school can have a significant effect on children's ability to learn.[11] These include family income, level of parental education, and the health of the student. Children in poverty are less likely to grow up in households that contain books, and their parents often lack the ability to read to them.[12] Children who have not been read to at home and whose parents can not help them learn to read are at a distinct disadvantage in the early school years.

Thousands of children in Texas go to school hungry each day. Inadequate nutrition affects school performance and leads to more frequent illness and school absence.[13] Hungry children learn less effectively

because they are more irritable and less able to concentrate.[14] Fortunately, Texas public schools offer free or reduced-price lunch and breakfast to low-income children.[15] Participation in meal programs has been linked to higher test scores, reduced tardiness, and fewer absences.[16]

Family Literacy

In Texas, there are nearly 3.4 million individuals functioning at or below the literacy level, and more than 1.4 million are categorized as being limited English proficient.[17] Research has long demonstrated a strong correlation between parental reading and children's later success with literacy.[18] The nature and dynamics of the interaction between parent and child at reading time matters a good deal — perhaps more than the mere fact that parent-child reading occurs.[19]

Recent studies have focused on outcomes for children who read often, compared to those children who struggle in the area of reading comprehension.[20] Students who do more reading at home have higher reading and math scores. In addition, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) evaluations have found that achievement in school is consistently related to the number of reading materials in the home.[21]

Helping low-literate adults improve their basic skills has a direct and measurable impact on both the education and quality of life of their children. Further, children of adults who participate in literacy programs improve their grades and test scores, improve their reading skills, and are less likely to drop out.[22] The Texas Education Agency has received a statewide Even Start Family Literacy Initiative grant to improve family literacy services by building the capacity of local providers to coordinate and integrate existing federal, state, and local resources.[23]

Early Childhood Education

National attention has been brought to the importance of early childhood education and the negative impact poverty has on early physical, cognitive, language, and emotional development. Environmental deficits among very young children, such as a lack of cognitive stimulation or inadequate health care, can have particularly serious implications for child development.[24] With almost one-third of Texas children under age six living in poverty, the negative effects of these factors become a matter of great concern.[25]

As economically disadvantaged young children reach school age, many are less prepared to learn than their more affluent peers.[26] Early childhood centers, preschool programs, and nursery schools are important ways to promote appropriate cognitive development. They also encourage parent involvement and are important mechanisms for providing essential services such as nutritional supplements and health care, which help ensure that children are ready for school.[27]

Studies have shown that early education programs, such as pre-kindergarten, can play a fundamental role in increasing IQ scores and lowering rates of placement in special education.[28] However, many children are not able to participate in these early education programs because they are unavailable or too costly. Nationally, over half (52%) of 3- and 4-year-olds in high-income families were enrolled in preschool in 1993, compared to one-fourth (24%) of 3- and 4-year-olds in low-income families.[29] In Texas, 16.3 percent of all 3-4 year olds participated in public pre-kindergarten programs in 1993-4.[30]

One public pre-K program, Head Start, is widely acknowledged as a successful program to help economically disadvantaged children develop social competence and readiness for school. However, Head Start serves only an estimated 25 percent of children who are eligible.[31] Similarly, public pre-kindergarten programs, available in public schools to children who are unable to speak and understand English, are disadvantaged, or homeless, only serve about two-thirds of eligible children.[32] Young children need access to high quality early education programs that are suited to the particular needs of the child in order to ensure lasting developmental improvements.

Student's achievement in school is influenced by the early education they receive. Texas needs to be clear about what we expect children to be able to do when they enter school so that early education can be geared toward specific measurable goals. More early childhood programs, particularly those geared toward low-income children, are needed.

Learning Standards and Student Assessment

Our public schools are charged with the job of preparing students for college and/or the work place. The academic standards to which schools and students should be held and the methods by which student and school performance are evaluated are the subject of great debate. Ideally, students should be evaluated using culturally and developmentally appropriate instruments that are based on standards for what students should know and be able to do. Each child should receive an education that will prepare him or her for a successful life and standards and tests should measure whether each child is receiving that education. Standards should be appropriate and rigorous.

Texas has an accountability system that is among the more unique in the nation. A school's rating is not only based on the aggregate performance of students, but also on the performance of individual groups of students – in particular, African American, Hispanic, and low-income students. This system leads to the improvement of these groups because special efforts are made to improve each student's performance.[33]

The most commonly used test of academic performance is the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) test. The TAAS test is a tool used by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to measure how well Texas students are faring academically in basic subjects such as math, reading, and writing. The tests are also an indirect measure of the success of teachers and schools in imparting to their students the standard knowledge and skills set for each grade level. A passing score, however, indicates that the student has met only the minimum expectation for that grade level and is not a measure of proficiency in the subject.

Student Achievement

An international study released recently by the Department of Education showed that American 12th graders are near the bottom of 21 countries studied in science and math.[34] Although at the fourth grade level, the U.S. compared relatively favorably with other countries, by the time U.S. students reach the 12th grade, their understanding of science and math is significantly weaker than their peers in many other countries.[35] For example, countries whose 12th graders performed significantly better than the U.S. in science include Sweden, Netherlands, Iceland, Norway, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland, Austria, Slovenia, and Denmark. The typical U.S. curriculum contains a far greater number of topics than most other countries. Researchers found a strong connection between our broad curriculum and our poor performance.[36]

Student achievement, however, is improving. Texas 4th grade students tied for the highest gain from 1992 and 1996 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) mathematics test out of all the states participating in the testing. In addition, Texas had the highest percentage of African American 4th grade students and the fourth highest percentage of Hispanic 4th grade students scoring "At or above basic" on the NAEP mathematics test.[37]

In the spring of 1997, almost three-fourths of all students taking the TAAS test passed (73.2%) — up from 67.1 percent just one year earlier.[38] For the third year in a row, the greatest improvements have been seen in the math test scores, with African American students showing the largest gains in math.[39] While TAAS scores are improving statewide, many children are still not passing the tests and far more students are not proficient in the subjects tested. According to the Texas Education Agency, about 58 percent of schools had at least half of the students performing proficiently in reading but only 21 percent of schools had at least half of the students performing proficiently in math during the 1995-6 school year.[40]

Percent Passing TAAS	1996	1997
All tests taken	67.1	73.2
Reading	80.4	84.0
Writing	82.9	85.3
Math	74.2	80.1
African American	46.9	55.7
Hispanic	54.2	61.9
Anglo	79.8	84.9
Other	81.5	85.6
Economically Disadvantaged	52.5	60.2

There are significant differences between ethnic groups and students of different economic groups in TAAS performance. These disparities along with regional differences will be examined in detail in the *Measuring Up* report on Student Assessment and Performance, which will be released in the near future.

Social Promotion

Social promotion occurs when a student is advanced to the next grade but hasn't mastered the required skills on standardized tests. In Chicago schools, referred to by President Clinton as a successful model to end social promotion, students are required to pass grade level material using the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a national, norm-referenced instrument, to be promoted from the third, sixth, eighth, and ninth grades. If students don't pass, they go to mandatory summer school and have another opportunity to pass the test. If they fail again, they do not advance to the next grade.[41]

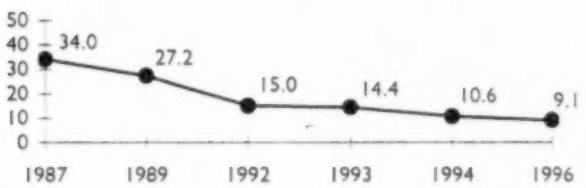
In Texas, Governor Bush has said he intends to ask the State Legislature during the next session for $203.1 million for remedial programs, including a suggested mandatory summer school or after-school tutoring.[42] Bush also plans to target $221 million to expand reading academies, expand the advanced placement program, and to create teacher academies.[43]

Dropouts

School dropouts are costly to the whole society. Dropouts do not obtain the necessary skills for a more technological workplace and earn, on average, one-third the annual income of college graduates. School dropouts experience poverty at ten times the rate of those who complete college and are less capable of pulling themselves and their families out of poverty.[44] If families, schools, social service agencies, as well as the community at large cooperate to provide the needed support and incentives to children, they will be more likely to stay in school and develop to their full potential.

During the 1995-6 school year, the total number of Texas students in grades 7 through 12 who dropped out of public school was 29,207 — down 711 from the year before[45] and more than 10,000 fewer than in 1993-4.[46] The estimated longitudinal dropout rate[47] for Texas has consistently declined since 1987.[48]

Estimated Longitudinal Dropout Rates



Of the students dropping out of public schools in Texas, approximately 32.9 percent (9,608 students) were identified as economically disadvantaged during the 1995-6 school year.[49] As discussed at the beginning of this report, living at or near poverty produces many challenges and is a predictor of problems in school.

A reliable comparison of dropout rates over time is not possible in Texas because there have been significant changes in the methods for collecting and verifying this data as well as changes in the dropout definition itself. Furthermore, starting in 1993-4, seniors who fail exit-level TAAS tests, but pass all other graduation requirements, are now excluded from the dropout count.[50] The Texas Education Agency has improved its ability to track students who have moved from one school district to another so students who continue school in another district are no longer reported as dropouts. These changes are partially responsible for the decline in the number of dropouts reported.

Endeavors to lower the dropout rate are excellent ways improve the lives of children and enhance their ability to provide for their own families when they grow up. Lowering dropout rates also lowers costs to society.

Children with Special Challenges

Children with special needs face added challenges in school. This section will address issues related to students whose primary language is not English, students with disabilities, migrant, and homeless children.

Bilingual Education

The Texas Education Agency requires the public school system to provide bilingual education programs in the elementary grades when district enrollment exceeds twenty students with limited English proficiency (of the same language background) in any grade. English-as-a-second language (ESL) instruction must be provided to students with limited English proficiency when bilingual education is not offered.

Twelve percent of all students enrolled in Texas schools are participating in Bilingual/ESL education.[51] Programs that address the learning needs of individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) can be variously described as immersion programs, transitional bilingual education, ESL, and two-way developmental bilingual education.[52]

Bilingual education is a very contentious issue. Social and political differences of opinion in the areas of multiculturalism, immigration, and even the value of knowing more than one language in modern culture all affect this discussion. Any discussion of this issue should be focused on finding methods of teaching that result in success for all students.

Special Education

Children who receive special education have been determined to have a "handicapping condition" that entitles them to special education services.[53] The handicapping condition might include learning disabilities, speech impairments, physical handicaps, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, autism, multiple handicaps, traumatic brain injury, visual handicaps, or hearing impairments.[54] Services for children receiving special education include not only special developmental and corrective teaching and special testing, but also related services such as physical and occupational therapy and transportation.[55] In Texas during the school year 1996-7, 12 percent of all students in public schools (about 400,000 children) were enrolled in special education programs, with 12 percent of all instructional expenditures going towards funding special education programs.[56]

Some students may be inappropriately placed in special education classes. Nationally, minority students are more likely to be placed in special education than other groups. "Poor African American students are 2.3 times more likely to be identified by their teacher as having mental retardation than their Anglo counterpart."[57] In Texas, more than twice as many African American children are diagnosed with mental retardation as Hispanic children and almost three times as likely as Anglo children.[58] African American children also have much higher rates of diagnoses for emotional disturbance and learning disabilities. The percent children with visually and auditory disabilities is virtually the same for all ethnic groups. Over all, 15.4 percent of all African American students are in special education, while 11.5 percent of Hispanic and 12.6 percent of Anglo children are in special education.

Percent of each Ethnic Group Diagnosed with Disability Conditions

	Visual or Auditory	Mentally Retarded	Emotionally Disturbed	Learning Disabled	All other Disabilities	All Students with Disabilities
African American	0.24	1.44	1.39	8.73	3.58	**15.4**
Hispanic	0.24	0.71	0.64	7.11	2.77	**11.5**
Anglo	0.23	0.54	1.06	6.53	4.26	**12.6**
Other	0.18	0.17	0.21	2.00	2.03	**4.8**
Total	**0.23**	**0.73**	**0.92**	**6.85**	**3.55**	**12.3**

Texas Education Agency for 1997-8 school year

While over-referral to special education is an important issue, a bigger issue is the inferiority of the services children with special needs receive. Upcoming reports on children with special challenges will expand on these issues and provide a discussion of homeless and migrant children as well.

CHALLENGES TO SCHOOLS

Schools face many challenges in serving students, particularly those with low-economic status. The following pages address some of these challenges. Each of these topics will be addressed in greater detail in upcoming *Measuring Up* reports.

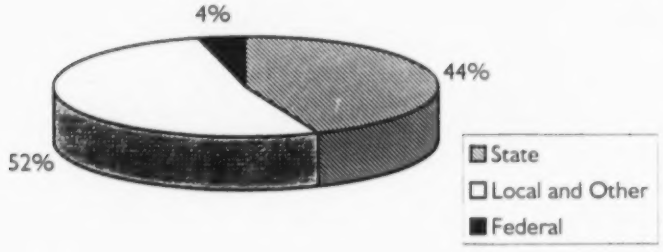
School Finance

Texas spends less per pupil on education than most other states in the nation. In spite of a greater than 10 percent increase in state appropriations for education since 1996[59], Texas ranks toward the bottom compared to other states in per pupil spending for education (31st out of 50 states).[60] The average per pupil expenditure (including all funding sources) in the U.S. for the fiscal year 1996 was $5,652 and for Texas the average per pupil expenditure was $5,168 — $484 less per pupil in Texas.

School finance has been the subject of numerous political, legislative, and legal discussions. However, Texas children still do not have equal access to school funding. There is a great degree of variance in per pupil expenditures from one district to the next. In Texas, some school districts spent more than twice as much on total operating expenditures per pupil than others. While the average per pupil operating expenditure in Texas was $4,717 in 1996-1997 most of the school districts spent between $4,019 to $8,146 per student.[61] This inequity in spending, along with the resulting inequities in resources, performance, and student achievement, affect the quality of the entire educational system in Texas.

All school districts should be guaranteed an adequate "foundation" level of funding sufficient for the school system to provide a basic education to all students. The current school finance system, approved by the Texas Supreme Court in 1995, attempts to reduce the effect of the disparity among school districts in the amount of taxable property wealth available to fund public education.[62] All districts are guaranteed a certain amount of revenue per student for each penny of tax effort. If a district cannot generate the guaranteed amount from local property taxes, the state makes up the difference. In addition, districts that are able to raise more than a certain amount per student for each penny of tax effort are required to give the excess revenue to the state, which redistributes it to less wealthy districts. This provision is widely known as the "Robin Hood" system.[63] Unfortunately, this system still leaves a disparity between districts. Poorer school districts still cannot generate the same amount of revenue as wealthier districts, leaving them struggling to stretch their limited resources.

School Revenue Sources 1996-1997



The upcoming report on School Finance will present more information on equity issues as well as a historical accounting of how school finance has evolved over the last several years.

School Crowding

Small schools and classrooms are consistently related to higher grades and test scores, fewer suspensions and dropouts, and better rates of employment and college attendance after graduation.[64] A national study of public school enrollment growth ranked Texas 33rd in the nation in terms of its pupil/teacher ratio.[65] The study found 15.6 pupils per teacher in the Fall of 1995.[66]

While some Texas classes are very large, crowding in Texas schools is not as big a challenge as it was 10 years ago.[67] Progress has been made in reducing class size and this may have contributed to improvement in student's performance. Texas law limits the number of students in kindergarten through fourth grade to 22.[68] In higher grades, however, classroom size can be much larger. When the ratio of students to teachers is high, students cannot get the individual attention they need. It is also hard to concentrate in a room with noise from a large number of students.[69]

Professional Development and Teacher Training

There are 247,651 full-time teachers in Texas. One-third of all teachers have five or fewer years of experience and the average length of experience is 11.7 years. Twenty-seven percent of all teachers have advanced degrees (master's or doctoral degrees). The average base salary for teachers is $32,426[70]

A recently released national study of teaching quality gave Texas a grade of C+ for teaching quality. The report points out that although Texas has standards for assessing new teachers, the state does not require an evaluation of new teachers' classroom performance. According to the same study, only 51 percent of secondary school teachers hold a degree in the subject they teach.[71] As mentioned earlier, Governor Bush plans to target state funding to create teacher academies.[72]

In Texas, there is a critical need for ongoing training for teachers. Many teachers in Texas are not adequately certified in the subjects they teach. Teachers who have not yet earned appropriate certification can be granted permits allowing them to be employed in the public school system. The areas of bilingual education, special education, and English as a Second Language (ESL) have the highest proportion of teachers holding a special permit granted on a temporary basis to teachers without the appropriate certification.[73]

Technology in Schools

Computers can be extremely motivating learning tools. In Texas, however, there is a growing disparity in how technology is used in classrooms of different schools. Some schools have very basic computer labs. Other schools with more resources are likely to have computers in the classrooms that are linked to the Internet. The children in schools with more advanced computer technologies "have exposure to worlds beyond the teacher's knowledge. They have greater opportunities to explore in-depth things that interest them."[74]

Currently, Texas schools have an average of eleven students per computer.[75] In 1997, the Texas Education Agency awarded $15.5 million in technology grants to 19 school districts and educational cooperatives. These grants are for the development of video networking, on-line curriculum, technology training, computer networking, and other technology projects.[76] It will be important to monitor the implementation and outcomes of using these new technologies to ensure that students are gaining skills that will be useful.

Some question whether the large investment in hardware, software, and training that becomes quickly obsolete is truly worth it. Very little research exists that demonstrates that computer technology helps students learn better and some are concerned about adverse effects on children's posture, eyesight, and hands. Furthermore, most teachers have not received adequate training in this medium.[77] Schools need to develop a plan for keeping hardware and software current and for training teachers to make maximum use of this learning tool.

School Facilities

A 1991 study of public school facilities, mandated by the Texas Legislature, reported that 27 percent of Texas' public schools have at least one inadequate building.[78] Forty-six percent report at least one inadequate building feature including deficits in roof, foundation, walls, plumbing, and electrical power or lighting. Lack of compliance with American Disabilities Act requirements is also an issue. Sixty percent of schools reported at least one unsatisfactory environmental factor, such as poor lighting, heating, ventilation, air quality, energy efficiency, and physical security.[79] In addition to physical plant deficits, the report also cited

that electronic support for computer technology was lacking. A substantial proportion of schools lacked sufficient modems, modem lines, power for communications, and fiber optic cable.[80]

In 1995, the 74th Legislature included $170 million in the budget for facilities in the form of one-time grants. The 75th Legislature in 1997 increased the funding for facilities to $200 million. Although funding for facilities has increased, there is still great need for improvements in many schools.

Parental and Family Involvement with Schools

Family participation is critical to students' academic success.[81] Research shows that parental involvement improves students' achievement, school programs, and the school environment.[82] It also increases the parents' role in helping their children learn and makes teachers more effective in their work. Many schools, therefore, are taking action to engage families, both at home and in the school. Family involvement may take different forms. Schools, for example, may help families support children as students by suggesting ways to support learning at home and providing programs to help families with health, nutrition, or other concerns. Programs also may assist parents in improving their own education through GED or family literacy programs.[83] When parents and school staff reinforce each other's efforts, they create support for children that enhances their achievement, behavior, and future success.[84]

In 1995, the Texas Legislature revised the Education Code to include a Mission of Public Education that places emphasis on the importance of parent involvement.[85] The first objective of the Mission states that "Parents will be full partners with educators in the education of their children."[86] This objective is grounded in "the conviction that a successful public education system is directly related to a strong, dedicated, and supportive family and that parental involvement in the school is essential for maximum educational achievement of a child."[87] The Texas State Board of Education advocates as well for parent and family involvement, as indicated in its Long-Range Plan for Public Education, 1996-2000.[88]

Parents, who may themselves have experienced difficulties with schools, either as students themselves or as parents may be reluctant to participate. Outreach on the part of teachers and administrators is necessary to elicit active involvement of parents. Barriers for parental involvement can include poor English skills and different cultural backgrounds. But also, when parents have the feeling the only time they are asked to come to school is when their child is in trouble, they are more reluctant to be involved.[89] To compensate for these barriers, teachers must recognize some parents' historical reluctance to involve themselves in the schools and try to find ways to make it easier for parents to enter the system.[90]

Texas has several programs to increase parental involvement. Initiatives such as Teachers as Partners with Parents (TAPP) and the Parent Teacher Association programs for parent/family involvement will be discussed in more detail in upcoming reports.

Violence in Schools

There is a growing concern across the nation about school violence. Once thought to be primarily a problem of urban schools, school violence has spread to all areas of the nation. The National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health reports that 24.1 percent of students indicated they had been the victim of violence in a school setting. Further, 12.4 percent of students indicated they had carried a weapon in the previous thirty days.[91] Another national study — the National Crime Victimization Survey — showed that students were more likely in 1995 to report that they had experienced violent victimization, could obtain drugs, and were aware of street gangs at school than in 1989.[92]

Many teachers and staff are concerned about safety in school. In 1995, the Texas Legislature adopted a new state policy requiring that each school system create alternative education programs, including "alternative educational settings for behavioral management."[93] These programs were in response to classroom teachers who expressed the need for student disciplinary options that would allow them to remove from their classes students who were engaged in serious misbehavior.[94]

The new policy specifies that students may be removed to alternative education programs if they engage in conduct punishable as a felony or if they commit a series of specified serious offenses while on school property or while attending a school-sponsored or school-related activity on or off school property.[95]

The statute also provides that students be removed to alternative education programs if they commit other violations specified in student "codes of conduct" developed by local school districts.[96] According to summary data recently compiled by the Texas Education Agency, approximately 80,000 students were referred to alternative educational programs in the 1996-1997 school year.[97] There has not been data to this point related to the academic outcomes of students placed in alternative education programs.[98]

Many school improvement initiatives, such as Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities, are required by the federal government. A recent report notes that "despite the existence and availability of a curriculum for violence and drug use prevention, few schools have implemented the lessons in a consistent manner."[99] Basic federal funding for this initiative may not be sufficient for its successful implementation. While many programs in the school are focused on dealing with violence once it has occurred, few are geared toward prevention of school violence.

School-Community Partnerships

Good schools providing a quality education and foundation for future success require a great commitment from educators and the community.[100] Local school boards allow for community participation in the educational decision making process. They are agents of the state and are composed of elected members. The school board is charged with translating "community needs, values, and expectations into policies, plans, and goals. In a parallel role, they interpret the policies of the school system to the community."[101] Board members help build public support and understanding of education, serve as a link between the school system and the public and establish a climate for change when change is appropriate. School boards provide local citizen supervision and control over education through hiring and budget decisions, which dictate the educational philosophy the school district will follow.[102]

It is vital that schools form other partnerships with community agencies and businesses as well. Breaking the cycle of disadvantage requires increased collaboration.[103] There are many examples of existing public private partnerships. Many of these will be discussed in future reports.

EDUCATION REFORMS IN TEXAS

There are a number of areas where the condition of education in Texas needs improvement. There are conflicting views about what should be done to improve education. The following section will briefly describe some programs and promising approaches in education designed to address some of the issues presented in this report. Future *Measuring Up* reports will also present more information about model programs and reform efforts in Texas.

Education reforms can generally be categorized into two types:

- **School finance reform**, including such initiatives such as charter schools, vouchers, and private educational contracts[104]; and
- **Strengthening educational programs,** including initiatives for improved standards, smaller schools, professional development, systems of accountability, magnet schools, family involvement, and school-community partnerships.

Charter Schools

A charter school is a public school that operates under a specific charter or contract granted by the state. Charter schools have the authority to operate for a specific period — normally five years. As a public institution charter schools are open to all who wish to attend, paid for with tax dollars, and accountable to state or local authorities. However, charter schools are much less encumbered by regulations than regular public schools and are largely self-governed. For instance, they are more free to hire whomever they like and are in control of their own curriculum.[105] Many charter schools try innovative learning methods, emphasize particular academic philosophies (e.g., 'back to basics'), try different pedagogical approaches (e.g., an integrated interdisciplinary curriculum), or focus on particular segments of the population (e.g., dropout recovery).[106]

Organizers of charter schools in Texas must be public or private higher education institutions, a nonprofit, or a governmental entity.[107] Texas' charter schools are exempted from most state and local laws and policies, have fiscal and legal autonomy, and can have uncertified teachers without a waiver.[108]

In Texas, during the 75th Legislative session, legislators raised the ceiling from twenty to one hundred open-enrollment charter schools.[109] New charter schools face many challenges. In some cases, charter schools receive less money per pupil than regular public schools and usually receive no start-up funds. This puts severe financial pressure on organizers who must find appropriate physical space and adhere to the same health and safety rules as traditional schools as well as provide special education services.[110] Opponents of charter schools believe they will drain operating funds from regular schools.[111]

Contracting

Contracting is a new idea for education reform in which the control of individual schools is given to independent contractors who are legally responsible for making sure the students are educated.[112] Rather than administrators, school boards would contract for everything needed including such things as teachers and lunches. Contract schools would have control over their own funding, staff, and programs. The risks for contract schools are those associated with political corruption and favoritism in awarding contracts.[113]

School Choice Magnet Schools

Magnet schools provide a curriculum designed around a specific subject area, structure, or method of instruction. These schools are commonly open to enrollment by any student.[114] The magnet school concept was developed to further school integration by attracting Anglo students to mostly minority, inner-city schools.[115] Magnet programs offer students, parents and educators the opportunity to actively seek a match with their own strengths, interests and needs.[116]

Many larger Texas school districts currently operate magnet programs. A survey of 150 school districts by the Texas Association of School Boards (TASB) in 1994, identified 43,000 students in 160 magnet schools within the responding 69 districts.[117] Most magnet programs permit student movement within and between school districts.

School-Based Services for Children and their Families

Social service programs help thousands of children across the state. Early childhood enrichment programs, health care, and basic subsistence assistance all assist the children in greatest need.[118] Unfortunately, many families have difficulty accessing the services they need. The current social services system can seem fragmented and confusing for families.[119]

School-linked family resource centers address the need for improved access to social services for children and families.[120] Schools are key pivotal points in the collaborative network of social service agencies. School personnel are keenly aware of the problems faced by students, families, and communities. Schools are thus ideally positioned to be the focal point for service delivery.[121] Initiatives such as the School of the Future and Communities in Schools have begun to meet this need. These programs will be discussed in more detail in upcoming reports.

A "full-service school" provides services ranging from family crisis intervention to school-based health services and includes specialized services for children and families in need of help. The most important feature of this model is its focus on the local community, with participation of parents and teachers in decision making and with a full array of services offered in one setting.[122] School-based service programs connect needed community resources with schools to help young people learn, stay in school, and successfully prepare for life. Small teams of social service providers form close relationships with students and work along with teachers, volunteers, and mentors to keep students in school.[123] Opponents to school-based services maintain that the job of schools is to teach children and that anything more detracts from their basic mission.

Vouchers

Although there has been much discussion and debate about vouchers, in 1997, there were only two voucher programs operating in the nation.[124] Although there are different voucher desings, all voucher plans would involve government payments given directly to families for education. Vouchers could be used to pay for tuition at the school of the family's choice. Some plans would allow the vouchers to be used only at private schools and others would provide every family with school-age children a voucher redeemable at any private or public school.[125]

Proponents of vouchers believe that students should be able to choose from all education options, particularly when public schools are not meeting their needs. Opponents argue that vouchers benefit more well-to-do families and can act as a drain of good students and resources from the public school system. "Because private schools can pick and choose students, those with special education needs or disciplinary problems would be left behind in public schools."[126] Furthermore, there is much discussion about the constitutionality of vouchers, particularly if they were used to support church-affiliated schools.[127]

The Children's Educational Opportunity Foundation (CEO) has provided a $50 million scholarship fund to the Edgewood school district in San Antonio.[128] As a result of the Horizon Scholarship Fund, nearly all the 14,000 students in the Edgewood school district will be able to choose between public and private school. It is too soon to evaluate the success of this experiment.

Conclusion

Preparing students to enter college and the work force, is a complex undertaking that is affected by many social and environmental factors. Some of these factors include:

- the health and learning readiness of the child.
- the ability of the family to participate in the child's learning experience.
- the successfulness of the schools to provide a safe and effective learning environment.
- the willingness of the community to invest in its work force and economic future.

In Texas, almost half of all students in public school are considered economically disadvantaged. A large portion of students lack English proficiency or have other disabilities and barriers to learning. This presents a variety of difficult challenges to students, to their families, to schools, and to the community as a whole.

According to both national and state tests of student achievement, Texas students have made significant academic improvements in recent years — particularly among African American, Hispanic, and students from low-income families. Although academic standards are improving, there are still far too many students who do not meet the lowest acceptable expectations for achievement. Far fewer students are mastering the material they are expected to learn.

While Texas has made some remarkable gains, there are still areas that need improvement. There is still a gap between African American, Hispanic and low-income students and Anglo children — although that gap is narrowing. While there is general improvement in test scores in Texas, there are also individual schools that have shown great improvements. Even some schools with large numbers of ethnic minority students or students living at or near poverty have overcome challenges and performed well. The methods these schools are using to help these children should be carefully examined and replicated throughout the state.

Some of the recommendations that emerge from this research include:

- Although Texans spend a large part of the state's budget on education, our per pupil spending is still low compared to the rest of the nation. Texas needs to improve our financial commitment to our future.
- Despite trends in other states Texas needs to continue offering bilingual education to all children that want or need to speak more than one language.
- The incorporation of drop out prevention programs, especially those targeted to low-income students, are needed to ensure that we do not all pay the cost of our students dropping out.
- Children deserve to be safe at school. Those that commit acts of violence in our schools need to be held accountable. As well, our schools need to be held accountable for recording data on the incidence of violence in our schools to further the development of violence prevention programs.
- School clinics, as a type of school-based family service, are important for increasing the access to health care for our children. We must continue the effort to include these clinics in our schools.
- Our educators are an important resource and as such deserve teacher training, continuing education, and more competitive salaries.
- To best meet the educational needs of children and to incorporate the values of the community, programs that facilitate community involvement with schools are needed.
- Children need equal, unbiased access to special education.
- While Texans have increased TAAS standards and improved performance, our schools should be held to higher standards to ensure that our children can compete globally.
- All Texas children need equal access to technologies that will provide new opportunities to learn.
- Increased availability of early childhood development programs would help more children enter school ready to learn.
- The Even Start Family Literacy Initiative should be continued and supported to help all Texans help our children to read.
- Because our education system benefits from community involvement, more encouragement needs to be placed on parental and other community partnerships.

Although we are seeing some improvements in education in Texas, far too many students are not being adequately prepared to enter college or the workforce. Although the dropout rate is declining, far too many students do not stay in school to graduation. Far too many schools have insufficient resources to do the job right. Far too many teachers expect far too little from their students. Parents and community members should hold our students and our schools to the highest standards of excellence. Only then can we expect the best for the future of Texas.

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